

In Memory of Isabel Sánchez

Pura Agua Bendita

By Josie Merla Martin and Cynthia Spielman, *Corazones de Esperanza*

It is always hard to lose someone you love so much, but it is even more difficult when they are so young. Isabel Sánchez was a few weeks shy of her 98th birthday when she died, but she was one of the most vibrant people I've ever met. When my mother, Josie, and I would get together with Isabel and Enrique at our regular lunch at Ginn's, it was like the years fell away as they talked and sang and teased and laughed. We shared birthday cakes and friendship. Their Westside humor—an edgy humor—and one that can only be shared between close friends, was what kept us laughing: My mother would call Mrs. Sánchez “holy water” (*agua bendita*) that everyone wanted to touch and mom playfully threatened to sit next to her at social events because so many people came up to Isabel to talk. Mrs. Sánchez would retort that my mother was just jealous and if she tried harder, *pobrecita*, people might like her too.

When Isabel would call my mother, Isabel would say, “Let me sit down because of the shock” (of her actually answering the phone).

When we drove to Ginns, our regular lunch date, my mother would make copies of songs and with Mr. Sánchez in the lead we would all sing there and back. One time my mother noticed that Isabel was not singing and Mr. Sánchez said that she was afraid because she couldn't sing. That did not set well. After our next song, after a moment of silence, Isabel asked if we could shut off the radio because all it was playing was noise.

Or the time we were making tamales, old school, at the Casa de Cuentos and I opened the pot and a pig head stared back at me. I dropped the lid and whined: “It's looking at me!” Isabel remarked, “Cynthia, grow up!” I was 60.

There was the time my mother complained that she wasn't feeling well at lunch and Isabel told my mother she was going to buy a new dress. My mother asked, “Why?” Isabel replied, “For



Josie & Isabel (top) and at right Isabel & Enrique Sánchez with a pig's head used to make tamales in the traditional way.



your funeral!” My mother retorted, “No! I don't want you to look better than me!” Mrs. Sánchez said that she was going to wear her lipstick so my mother needed to get better.

Isabel Sánchez was one of the founders of the *Corazones de Esperanza*, a group of elders who met to share memories and food, consciously preserving and recording the cultural history of the Westside, but also to discuss important Westside issues and to advocate for the good of their community. She inspired us all in her work for the Westside and for justice.

I will always honor the gifts Isabel gave me that will continue to guide: kindness when there is every reason not to be kind, joy when we can so easily give in to sorrow or anger, strength to

work for better even when we are told it is useless, and love which remains strong even in the finality of death.

Thank you for loving my mother and me. Thank you for loving all of us. Even after the first deep grief subsides, we will always feel your loss, but we will also laugh and talk and remember. I promise.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *There have been so many tributes and memories to share about Isabel that one issue of La Voz cannot do her justice. We invite readers to continue to share tributes to her and we'll print as much as possible in upcoming issues and at our website: www.esperanzacenter.org. Thank you, for your love and concern as we try to live up to the memory of this magnificent being, named, Isabel Casillas Sánchez who remains, ¡Presente!*



Some of the *Corazones de Esperanza* (l to r)—Bernard & Enrique Sánchez, Angie Merla, Josie Merla Martin, Mildred Hilbrich, Lucy & Ray Pérez (behind) and Isabel & Gustavo Sánchez show off a barrilete they made for Day of the Dead, as is done in Guatemala.